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The North-West Frontier of Egypt

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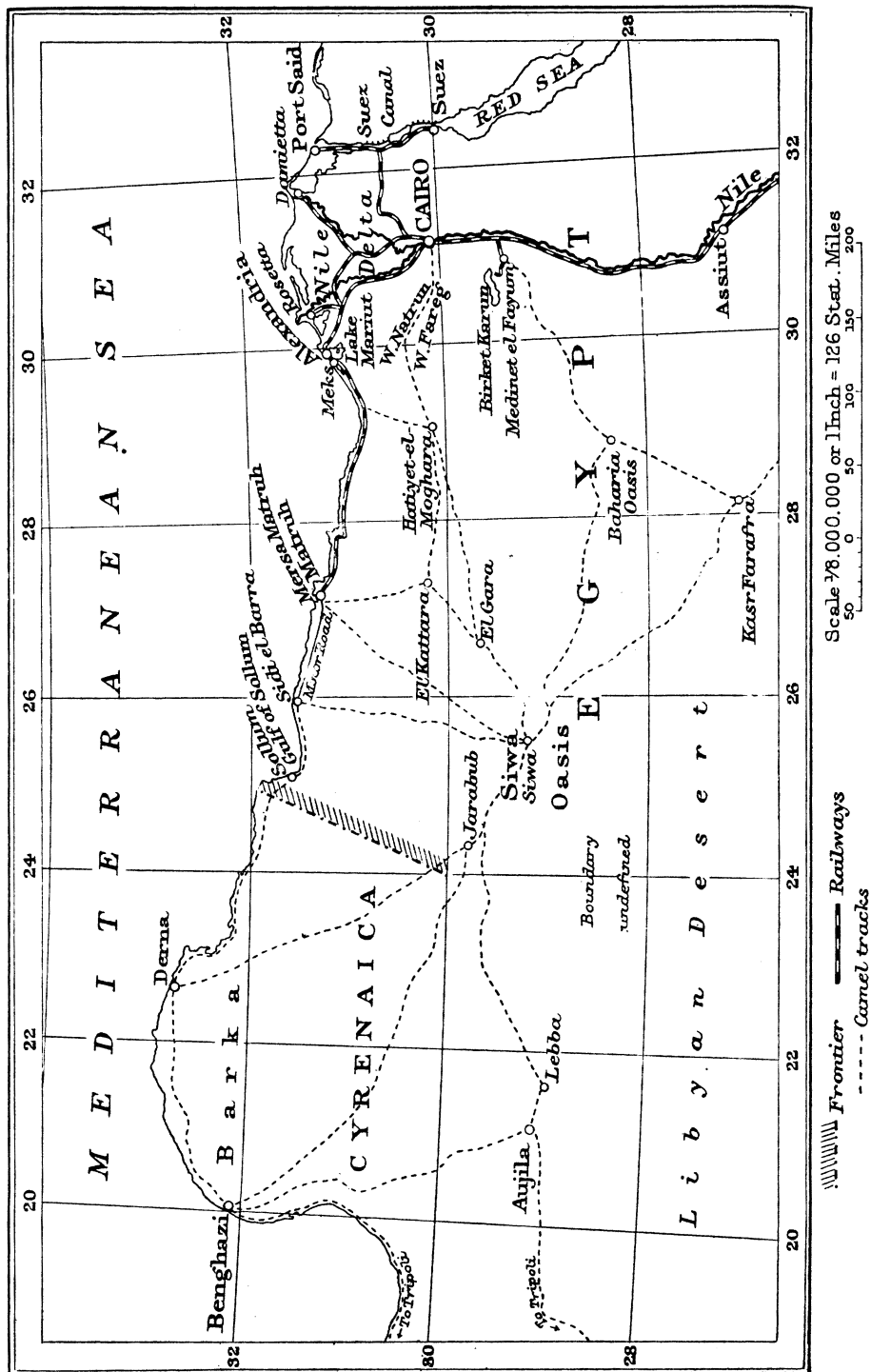
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### THE NORTH-WEST FRONTIER OF EGYPT.

RECENT military operations have drawn attention to the north-west borderlands of Egypt. An inhospitable shore, a still more inhospitable hinterland, the lack of towns and of modern means of communication, the presence of a nomadic population not noted for friendliness to strangers—these things have served for centuries to keep these districts isolated, notwithstanding that they afford the one means of access by land to and from Egypt and the rest of North Africa.

The region in question extends from the Nile Delta westward to Cyrenaica, and from the Mediterranean to the northern border of the Libyan desert. Further south the immense sand-dunes which run roughly parallel to the valley of the Nile interpose an obstacle which has proved insuperable to travel east and west across the heart of the desert. Three-fourths or more of the region is a limestone tableland and is generally known as the Libyan Desert Plateau, though the ancient name, Marmarica, is still occasionally used and is a convenient designation. The plateau is flat, of moderate elevation and predominantly arid. It is triangular in shape and on the west, where it merges in the higher plateau of Barka, is at its greatest width, which may be taken at 170 miles. Reckoning from the furthest westerly point claimed by Egypt it has a length of some 400 miles, while its breadth where it approaches the Delta decreases to less than 50 miles. The level of the tableland varies roughly from 600 to 300

SKETCH MAP TO ILLUSTRATE THE NOTES BY FRANK R. CANA ON THE NORTH-WEST FRONTIER OF EGYPT.



feet. Large tracts of the surface are bare rock, but other areas are covered with a thin layer of soil, and in slight depressions there are patches of camel thorn and coarse grass. From the general level rise numerous isolated hills of no great height but conspicuous in the flat landscape. Marmarica receives a fairly heavy rainfall in winter, at which season water collects in shallow rock basins forming pools which stand for some time. A few wadis, in which vegetation occurs at intervals, score the plateau, but there is no running water and springs are infrequent.

Such as far as it is known is the character of the main mass of the tableland. Its resources are too scanty to support a sedentary population, and owing to the scarcity of water and forage there is no highway through its centre going east and west. Were the difficulties indicated overcome there are, however, no other natural obstacles to traversing the plateau in any direction. As it is there are but two routes between Egypt and the Barbary States, a southern and a northern. The northern, the more important, skirts the Mediterranean; the southern lies mainly along the bed of dry river valleys just south of the southern escarpment of the plateau. This is the route from Jarabub, by Siwa and Gara oases, to the Wadi Moghara and thence by the Wadi Fareg or the Wadi Natrun to Cairo. This route is sufficiently known not to need description here; it is arduous and hardly practicable for any large force. From four or five places along this route camel tracks go north across the plateau to the Mediterranean.

Jarabub has been taken as the western terminus of this southern route as it is the most westerly point claimed by Egypt. The inland frontier separating Egyptian and Italian territory has not been defined, but Italy, as the successor to the sovereign rights of Turkey in Tripoli and Cyrenaica, agreed in 1911 to the British contention that on the coast Egyptian territory extended west to and included the "port" of Sollum, at the head of the gulf of the same name. Thence the frontier line goes across the plateau in a south-south-westerly direction so as to leave Jarabub to Egypt. Jarabub is an oasis of some importance. It was at one time the headquarters of the Senussi fraternity, has still a Senussi monastery and contains the tomb of the founder of the sect. It is thus a place of pilgrimage for Senussites. Caravan routes lead west from it to Aujila and Tripoli, north-west to the seaports of Benghazi and Derna, and south to Kufra, the present headquarters of the Senussi. (For an account of a recent visit to Jarabub see the *Geogr. Journ.*, vol. 43, p. 338.)

The northern route is much more frequented than that by Siwa. It clings close to the coast the whole way from Alexandria to Derna in Cyrenaica. Visitors to Alexandria who go out to Lake Mariut or leave Meks by the Bab el Arab may have chanced to have met a caravan of Bedawin bringing their desert produce to market. It was the unexpected volume of this desert traffic which, according to his own statement, induced the ex-Khedive Abbas Hilmi to begin the building of a railway

westward from Alexandria—the so-called Mariut line, now the property of the Egyptian Government. In ancient times, before the foundation of Alexandria—the period when the Libyans warred with the Pharaohs—on approaching the Nile this coast route turned south up the Wadi Natrun, and there is still a track, occasionally used, connecting the coast route with the Natrun valley.

A brief description of the northern border of the Marmarican plateau will show the advantage this coast route has over the desert route by Siwa. The plateau does not extend without a break in its level to the Mediterranean. Rugged cliffs jut out into the sea, though not to any great distance, and practically the whole coast-line is rock-bound. But there is often a terrace-like descent from the level of the inner plateau, the lower steps of the terrace being covered with a more or less deep layer of loam. There is a nearly continuous strip of level loam-covered limestone along the coast, and a good deal of this level area is cultivated and maintains a sedentary population. Though water is scarce it is not entirely absent, and barley of good quality is grown. The villages are usually at places close to the shore where a break in the coast-line makes a safe harbourage for boats and small sailing vessels. The depth of the plain varies in the western part of Marmarica from a few hundred yards to 12 or more miles; in the east the plateau recedes further from the Mediterranean, leaving for a length of 70 miles an area about 20 miles deep between it and the sea. It is along this level strip that the coast route between Egypt and the Barbary States runs. There is only one place of importance along the route; this is Mersa Matruh, which is about 200 miles west of Alexandria and about 150 miles east of Sollum. It owes its existence to a fairly commodious and sheltered bay to which access is gained by one of the breaks in the limestone cliffs forming the shore line, the fairway being about 800 feet wide. The advantages offered by this one decent harbour in a distance of 350 miles were recognized long ago, and in Ptolemaic and Roman times the port of Paraetonium stood on a bay (the entrance to which is now nearly silted up) immediately west of Matruh. The topography of the Matruh region has been studied in some detail and may be instanced as an example of the character of the northern versant of the Marmarican plateau. An almost straight line of low limestone hills faces the sea. Behind these hills is a strip of sand dunes, scrub, and salt lakes. This is succeeded by a nearly level plateau of loam-covered limestone stretching southward 10 to 12 miles, and affording a large area of cultivation. Beyond the plateau rises some 60 feet and is covered by a thinner layer of loam, and finally the level of the inner tableland is reached.

It is in the district of Matruh that the fighting between the Arabs and the British has taken place. From Sollum and one or two other places further west the garrisons have been withdrawn, though the coast is kept under strict surveillance by warships of the Allied fleets. In view of the

disturbed state of Cyrenaica and the dubious attitude of the nomads this withdrawal was well justified. The defence of Egypt from the west is best undertaken from Matruh. At and around that place, and in the coast region between it and the Delta, there is a population amounting probably to about 50,000. The nomads are estimated by the Egyptian authorities to number 35,000. They are Arabs or Arabized Berbers, the chief tribe being the Walid Ali. Scattered over the region are various *kasrs*—strongholds guarding the districts where there is grazing ground for the sheep and camels of the tribes. Numerous ruins, dating chiefly from the first to the fourth centuries A.D., along the route from Alexandria to Paraetonium, and broken wells and cisterns show the former importance of the district, and since about 1900 the Egyptian Government has done its best to revive its prosperity. Matruh is a port of entry, with a lighthouse, breakwater, and landing facilities, and the Government has marked out an area for the development of the town. Moreover the railway from Alexandria has recently been extended to Matruh. The value of rapid means of communication in warlike operations is obvious, and the fact that any invading force must proceed along a road so close to the shore that it is in many places commanded by the guns of the fleet lightens the task of the defence. It is not the object of this brief paper to consider military questions, but it may be pointed out that since the Fatimites entered Egypt from Cyrenaica in the tenth century there has been no invasion of the Nile valley from the west.

F. R. C.

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### THE ALPINE PASSES.

**Verkehrsgeschichte der Alpen.**— P. H. Scheffel. Two vols. Berlin: Dietrich Reimer. 1908, 1914. *Price* (vol. 1) 8s., (vol. 2) 12s. 9d.

THE work here under notice is incomplete. It lacks the third volume that should bring its story down to the present time, and—a trial to the reviewer—any index. But since there was an interval of six years (1908–14) between the publication of the first two volumes it seems inexpedient, particularly in present circumstances, to postpone indefinitely any notice of a valuable work which will fill what has been more or less of a gap in historical literature—for the works of Oehlmann and Lenthéric on the Alpine Passes had left much to be desired.

Dr. Scheffel's first volume deals with the story of the great passes as far as the days of Theodoric, his second carries it on to *circa* A.D. 1300, or the end of the middle ages.

In a preface to the second volume the author forestalls criticism, or perhaps answers comments made on its predecessor. He has, he admits, found himself unable to confine himself exactly within the limits of his